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ABSTRACT

Some states licensing agencies are seeking to change the way in which all teachers are certified as a result of demands by state legislative bodies and citizens groups who say that they want greater returns from their tax dollars as demonstrated by increased pupil learning. There are several arguments against competency-based teacher education, however. Some teachers argue that no one has shown that a strong relationship between teacher and pupil performance exists. The humanists are concerned with such matters as adaptability, creativity, self-concept, values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and other affective results of learning. However, changes in the way teachers are certified and in the ways they are prepared to teach are desirable. By 1980 all existing teacher education programs must become competency based. Future teachers of reading should be provided with a list of activities they can persue in order to become acquainted with and use appropriate diagnostic tools for analyzing reading behaviors and making recommendations for instructional programing. (SW)

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COMPETENCY-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION IN READING

In an article published in an educational journal in 1958 I proposed that persons who were offering reading services to children with reading problems should be licensed by the state. Just as physicians and dentists, electricians and plumbers, beauticians and barbers and other craftsman in several states were required to demonstrate ability in their chosen fields before being allowed to practice their skills, so should reading "specialists" be required to demonstrate their proficiency before being permitted to serve the public. At the time, this proposal seemed so radical that the editor of the publication, fearing adverse reactions from its readers, printed the article in the form of a "letter to the editor." His fears were not confirmed, and although its contents did evcke some response among people in the profession, to my knowledge the proposal has not been adopted in my country. Of course, several states in the United States have certified (licensed) reading teachers, reading clinicians, and reading consultants who work in the public schools. But such certification, as other

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certifications, is based upon the satisfactory completion of specified courses and not upon demonstration that applicants possess the required abilities to perform their tasks.

Pros and Cons

Today, as a result of demands by state legislative bodies and citizen groups who say that they want greater returns from their tax dollars as demonstrated by increased pupil learning, (the assumption being that the only way to measure teacher effectiveness is to demonstrate whether or not pupils have learned) some state licensing agencies now seek to change the way in which all teachers are certified. Essentially, the plans in some certification hoppers call for a unified effort by university, school, and professional groups to jointly assess teaching competencies through performance in school settings. Thus, no teacher would be able to obtain or retain a position unless he or she could demonstrate initial and continuing competence, however it is defined.

Although teacher groups have long recognized the inadequacies of some of its members, some, if not many, have advocated resistance to efforts to base teacher certification upon demonstrated competency. They argue that no one has shown that a strong relationship between teacher and pupil performance exists. (Although those of us who prepare reading teachers and offer specialists programs in reading believe that knowledgeable teachers of reading can help produce better readers than less knowledgeable teachers. If this were not so, how could we justify the expenditures that graduate

reading specialist programs entail?) They also say that competency levels for someone entering the profession should be different from those possessed by practicing teachers, and these are yet to be developed. And so do the strategies and tools required to focus in on teacher competencies.

Then there is the question the humanists in education raise. They are concerned with such matters as adaptability, creativity, self-concept, values, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and other affective results of learning. They ask, "Can you readily assess these internal meanings or changes that result from learning through specified and observable behaviors or competencies?" They deny that except on the lowest levels that anyone can, that instruments for doing so do not exist. While they do not deny the concept of accountability, they do reject the notion that all learning is discrete and observable. They would not reject the use of behavioral measures to assess skills learning. What they prefer to substitute for assessing other outcomes of learning is human judgment which in their view behavioristic tools cannot do well. While they recognize the possibility of fallibility, they do believe that through inference important educational outcomes can be weighed. Thus they would recommend the use of both tools.

There is no question that valid arguments against the immediate and wholesale introduction of new teacher-certification procedures exist. But these do not negate the desirability of making changes in the way teachers are certified and therefore in the ways they are prepared for teaching.

For if professional educators do not respond to existing pressures for change and address themselves to the issues under review, change, like some fame, will be thrust upon them. In fact, such is already the case in some places. The State Education Department of New York will no longer approve any new teacher-education programs unless it can be shown that they are competency based. Moreover, all existing teacher-education programs must become competency based by 1980. Although the Department is just beginning to address itself to the problems associated with competency-based systems of preparation -- it has issued a preliminary statement regarding Basic Competencies in Reading for the classroom teacher, reading teacher and reading consultant and commissioned the preparation of a test designed to served as a College Proficiency Examination in Reading Instruction in the Elementary School -- it has yet to consider the requirements and logistics associated with field-based education.

The International Reading Association, recognizing its role in improving teacher education for reading, has prepared a publication specifying "the professional knowledge and instruction competencies which are the products of adequate programs for preparing teachers to teach reading in the schools of today and tomorrow." Seventeen modules, each of which consists of five elements -- a participation assessment plan to determine the learner's readiness to cope with the module's content, the teacher competencies to be realized, minimum performance levels for each competency, suggested learning experiences, and an assessment plan to determine how well performances have been realized -- have been identified. These

modules could become a basis, with changes where desirable, for competency-based teacher education programs in reading.

So we already perceive changes in attitudes and in actions, all of which point in the direction of revised and perhaps more meaningful teacher education programs. That there are problems to be resolved cannot be denied -- problems involving financial support for conducting field-based education and offering creative learning experiences, problems growing out of associations among institutions of higher learning which still will be responsible for providing the basic education of prospective teachers and cooperating certifying agents, problems of reconciling tenure and competency, problems associated with valid assessments of teacher behavior and appropriate behaviors as they relate to pupil performance. These and more cannot be ignored. How well competency-based teacher education programs fare will certainly depend on the extent to which each can be satisfactorily resolved. Otherwise, like earlier movements for educational change, it will dissipate itself and there will be business as usual until new pressures force reexamination of what the profession is doing.

Programs for Teachers

Traditionally, prospective elementary school teachers in the States have been exposed to reading instruction through a combined reading-language arts methods course or a one semester course in reading improvement. Prospective secondary school teachers, until quite recently, have not even enjoyed this minimal exposure to reading concepts and methodologies. It is a fairly well-established fact that the typical newly-appointed teacher has

not been adequately prepared to teach reading even though many are expected to devote a major portion of school day time to doing so. Instructors of courses in reading or reading-language arts have been relying mainly on lectures, textbooks, and discussions as media through which students acquire information about teaching reading. No doubt some have provided other meaningful experiences beyond these, but the fact remains that there is even at the present time a wide gap between teachers' ability to discuss reading concepts and their ability to translate them into viable teaching strategies. Talk to these young people about their preparation for teaching reading and you will understand why they feel so inadequate and actually are; of course, some of their weaknesses are within themselves (some should not become teachers because they simply don't have what it takes -- sufficiently high capabilities and dedication). But even among the more capable are so many who lack real understanding about teaching reading and meeting children's reading needs. Rarely have they been required in courses to do more than verbalize about reading. So that when they have to face a class of 25 to 30 children they feel bewildered and lost, and unless they receive real help soon become discouraged. Perhaps this is one reason why so many of our schools adopt basal readers with their accompanying manuals, for without the latter a large number of teachers wouldn't know where and how to begin and what directions to take. There is no question but that changes in teacher preparation are long overdue, and preparation for teaching reading is a good place at which to start. Competency-based preparation might not offer complete solutions to hard questions, for there are no panaceas; however, there is a reasonable chance

that students who can demonstrate competency in teaching reading will be better teachers of reading than those who don't or can't.

In a sense we have always had competency-based programs but generally at only one level. I prefer to view the requirements of such programs as consisting of three tiers: demonstration that basic knowledge of reading and reading instruction has been mastered, demonstration that suitable strategies for teaching children based upon such understandings can be developed, and demonstration that these strategies can be successfully applied in helping children improve reading ability and foster appropriate attitudes toward reading. We have always required students to show evidence that they have acquired information about reading, usually through written tests which at times probe deeply and at other times just scratch surfaces. And I'm certain that at times we have required students to produce teaching plans that could be used for diagnostic teaching. But more often than not, and for a variety of reasons including time limitations, large numbers, etc., these requirements have not been consistently applied. And from the evidence at hand I do not seem to be going too far out on a limb when I suggest that rarely have we reached the tier that counts -- the "show -- me" phase.

When one decides to go the competency-based route it doesn't necessarily mean that he must discard every procedure he has been following in favor of innovative approaches. He can still adopt basic texbooks and reference sources, lecture, and hold group discussions. But since the main objective of the course or program is to help students develop competency in the fullest sense, there could be differences in the ways

he would operate henceforth. For one thing, he will seek some alternatives for ways of helping students acquire the content of reading and reading instruction. This effort results from the recognition that the classroom and books are not the only sources of information. Conceivably, instead of a class meeting 3 or 4 times a week as many undergraduate schedules in the States require, it might meet once a week or even less (and perhaps even less frequently in graduate sequences). When such reductions occur it is assumed that students are involved elsewhere in such activities as observing a reading lesson being taught in a local school, discussing reading concepts with another faculty member, viewing taped reading lessons, meeting with the class instructor individually or in groups to clarify issues, preparing instructional materials for a prescribed lesson, administering diagnostic tests to children, helping one or more children overcome specific reading weaknesses, reviewing lessons taught by peers, meeting with parents to explain current reading practices, reading professional literature evaluating suggestions in teaching manuals, etc.

Naturally, students do not engage in any of these possible activities in a disorganized way. They know in advance what competencies they will be required to demonstrate and what possible avenues they might follow to prepare for such demonstrations. Thus, if the module -- another way of saying the same thing is the unit of study but we must use current language to prove our sophistication and "with -- it -- ness" -- were evaluation for diagnostic teaching, the student would be provided with a list of activities he could pursue in order to at some future date

demonstrate his acquaintance with and use of appropriate diagnostic tools for analyzing reading behaviors and making recommendations for instructional programming. Here is one way some of these competencies could be stated:

A. Is familiar with reading tests

1. Can identify several oral and silent reading tests for elementary and secondary students

2. Is able to distinguish between a diagnostic and survey test.

3. Is able to assess a test's usefulness for measuring reading performances (discover word meaning in context, make inferences, etc.)

4. Can assess standardization procedures (validity, reliability, sampling)

5. Can prepare informal or teacher-made tests to measure specified skills

6. Is able to identify circumstances for using norm referenced tests.

B. Can use reading test results

1. Groups children on basis of test results

2. Determines reading levels

3. Analyzes reading strengths and weaknesses.

4. Plans appropriate lessons for different groups of children.

In order to be able to acquire these kinds of competencies students might select from a variety of activities those which will help to prepare them.

1. examine test files

2. check Buros' Reading Tests and Reviews

3. compare survey and diagnostic instruments

4. observe live or on video tape or film how informal inventories are prepared and administered, and how their results are interpreted.

5. administer oral and silent reading tests and evaluate results

6. discuss with a measurement expert the pros and cons of standarized vs. teacher-made tests

7. select appropriate testing instruments for individual children

8. plan instructional programs in word, comprehension, and study skills based on test evaluation

9. read textbook and reference sources on test construction and evaluation

10. make an item analysis of test items and classify them

11. study test manuals

Some students might not have to engage in all the activities to develop necessary competence, while others could require more and concentrated exposures. It might be useful to note that different levels of competencies -- at the entry, advanced, and specialized levels -- could be identified for those preparing to teach, others seeking advanced standing, and some who are or will be assuming responsibilities for administering and supervising reading programs.

Under such an arrangement students might not be pursuing identical areas of study at the same time since they would be progressing at different rates. And therefore they will be demonstrating their mastery of knowledge and practice when they are ready to do so. Presumably, if the succesful completion of one module depends upon the succersful completion of an earlier one, students will not move ahead to new modules until they have satisfied the requirements which have been established

for doing so. Instructors might prefer to group related modules of study and delay seeking evidences of competency until all have been completed.

Since competency in its truest sense involves more doing than talking, field-based programs where students can learn first hand what good reading instruction is all about and put what they've learned into practice to develop their skills are more desirable than those limited to campuses and simulated conditions. The assumptions underlying this proposal are more easily identified than attained -- that resources, both material and human -- are readily available. We know the problems associated with the placement of student teachers and how frustrated we can become in our efforts to provide quality experiences for them. But regardless of the obstacles that might have to be overcome we should strive to meet them as best we can. If state departments of education mandate field-based teacher education programs as a part of the certification process, then colleges and the public schools will have to accommodate them.

What could happen if competency requirements were to become the rule and were administered in the interests of improved school practices? The typical 4 and 5 year programs might be extended over longer time periods for some students and reduced for others. More students would likely be denied initial certification than is presently the case. And if the recommendations of some bodies are adopted, automatic permanent certification could become a thing of the past. Instead, teachers would have to demonstrate continuing professional growth, that is, show, that they are better teachers of reading than they were when they received

initial appointments and at subsequent time periods. The results of all this? Perhaps improved instructional programs in reading, more children who can read well and do read more, fewer children who require special reading services. Surely these are goals worth striving for. Competency-based teacher education reading programs could be a vehicle for attaining them.

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